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THE EMERGENCE OF GORBACHEV

By Serge Schmemmann

OFFICIAL SOVIET BIOGRAPHIES make for specialized reading, somewhat in the style of classified ads: "Gorbachev, Mikh. Ser. (b. 1931), Sov. Part., Govt. Official. Mbr. CPSU 1952— 1970 1st Sec'y Stavropol Kraikom CPSU. 1971 Mbr. CC CPSU. 1978 Sec'y CC CPSU. 1979 Cand. Mbr. Politburo CC CPSU. 1980 Mbr. Politburo CC CPSU..."

With practice, a message emerges from those stilted lines. The CPSU is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The CC is its Central Committee. And Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev is the youngest of the 11 men who sit at the pinnacle of Soviet power, the Politburo.

Those few lines bracket a career that has become the focus of some of the most intensive speculation ever to have focused on the future of the Soviet state. The generation that led the Soviet Union from the ravages of Stalinism and World War II through the enormous expansion of power and might over the past three decades is approaching an end.

Now a new guard stands poised to take charge, a generation of men in their 50's and 60's, and the question is whether they will prove ready or capable of breathing new life into a system that seems to have followed its leaders into debility and fatigue. More than any other Soviet leader, Gorbachev has come to personify the new breed. At only 54 years of age, the peasant's son and career party official has emerged from the shadow of Kremlin politics to become No. 2 in the party hierarchy, and to be a major contender to succeed the ailing Konstantin U. Chernenko, a man 20 years his senior.

It was as if in recognition of his importance that a group of heavyset men in dark coats and heavy fur hats marched across the frozen tarmac to a waiting Aeroflot jetliner in December. At the foot of the forward ramp they bid goodbye to Gorbachev, who mounted the steps, pausing for the stiff wave required by the ceremony of a Politburo member setting off on a Kremlin mission. His wife, Raisa Maksimovna, unobtrusively mounted the back steps.

In London, the front door opened and the two popped out together, jubilantly waving to the welcoming officials and the banks of photographers.

It was a classic magician's trick: Put a Kremlin heavy into one end, quietly slip an attractive woman into the other, wave through the air and — Presto! — out comes a New Soviet Leader, smiling, charming, gregarious and complete with elegant, educated and cultured wife.

Few in Britain were disappointed. The Gorbachevs ooh'd

and aah'd at Westminster Abbey and at Chequers. In the reading room of the British Museum, where Karl Marx once worked, he joked that "if people don't like Marxism, they should blame the British Museum." She ventured charmingly halting words in English and demonstrated a keen interest in literature and philosophy, which, it turned out, she had studied at Moscow State University. He suavely checked swarming photographers, saying, "Comrades, economize your supplies. That's enough." She captivated the gossip columnists: "What a chic lady is Mrs. Gorbachev!" gushed Peter Tory of The London Daily Mirror.

He wore business suits that made him indistinguishable from the Westerners he courted. She wore a dark suit one day; an executive pin-stripe with satin blouse the next, a white woolen suit with high-heeled patent-leather shoes the third, and, at a Soviet Embassy reception, a cream satin two-piece dress, gold lamé sandals with chain straps and pearl-drop earrings.

It was a measure of Gorbachev's success that he managed to generate excitement without diverging one whit from standard Kremlin lines. He faithfully pushed Moscow's current propaganda campaign against President Reagan's "Star Wars" space defense project, and he turned huffy at any mention of Moscow's repression of human and religious rights.

"I can quote a few facts about human rights in the United Kingdom," he fired back at one Member of Parliament who raised the issue in a private session. "For example, you persecute entire communities, nationalities." After some thought, his listeners concluded he probably meant Northern Ireland.

And, like any son of the Russian earth, he could not avoid a bit of classic Soviet bravado: "If you send us a flea, we will put horseshoes on it," he told a mystified Paul Channon, Trade Minister. The allusion was to a popular Russian tale whose moral is, in effect, that if you think you have done well, we can always top it.

That was hardly enough to darken the cheery glow of the visit. "A Red Star Rises in the East," declared The Sunday Times of London over a profile of Gorbachev. But it was Prime Minister Margaret

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